The Śālivahana or Śaka Era

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The Śalivahana or Śaka Era.

By Principal K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, M. A.

In the recent numbers of the *Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society* [1] an attempt has been made to reopen the fascinating question of the origin of the "Śālivahana Śaka". It has been argued by Mr. Srikanta Sastri (1) that "scholars are once again veering round to the old opinion put forth by the late Sir R. G. Bhandarkar as to the existence of Kanishka late in the 2nd century A.D."; (2) "that numismatic evidence goes to show that Goutamiputra lived about 120 A.D." and consequently he could not be taken to have started the era; (3) that Śālivahana may be identified with Hāla on the authority of lexicographers, (4) that the chronology as indicated by the *Matsya-Purāna* list of the Andhra kings supports this identification as "we find that the initial year of Hāla's accession coincides with that of the so called Śaka era". In a critical note reviewing these contentions Mr. V. S. Bakhle argued that (1) the discovery of the Andhau inscription has "placed Gautamīputra in the last quarter of the first century A.D. at the latest", (2) that Sir John Marshall's discovery of the Taxila inscription dated in the era Azes has cleared up the history of the N. W. in the first century before and after Christ in a manner that enables us to place Nahapāna in the 1st century B.C., 46 of his inscription being 12 B.C., and not 124 A.D. as held till recently, a consideration which supports an earlier date for Gautamīputra than the 2nd century A.D. (3) that this earlier date for Gautamiputra makes for an earlier date for Hāla than 78A.D. (4) that the fall of the Kshaharāta power before Gautamīputra was part of the disintegration of the Śaka-Pahlava power after the death of Gondopharnes, owing to the advance of the Kushana power, and must be placed about 70-80 A.D.; which raises a presumption that Gautamīputra (not Hāla) became the founder of the Śaka era as a result of his overthrow of the Kshaharāta power. It was however noted "that none of the Sātavāhana inscriptions men-

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[1] Srikanta Sastri, *Salivahana Era and Earliest Date*, *Q. J. M. S.*, XVII, pp. 334-337; Bakhle, *Salivahana Era*, Ibid., p. 69-71; Srikanta Sastri, *Salivahana Saka*, Ibid., p. 230-1.

tion the Śaka era". Also "this becomes all the more striking when we find the Rudradāman inscription of 130 A. D. (Andhau) dated in that era and the Sātavāhana inscriptions of the same period only mentioning the regnal years of the ruling king". Mr. Srikanta Sastri, subsequently, questioned the early date for Nahapāna on the grounds (a) that palaeographic and numismatic evidence is seldom conclusive; (b) that the Nasik inscriptions of Nahapāna refer to the coin Kushana and must be later than the rise of Kushana power and (c) that the Kshaharātas were Śakas and must have used a Śaka reckoning. The rest of his argument on this occasion merely begged the question and assumed that the era in question was a Sātavāhana reckoning founded by Hāla and imposed by the Sātavāhanas on their feudatories, though, strangely enough, they themselves did not use it on any occasion. However one fresh argument was urged—viz. that Gautamīputra could not have established the era, as his mother does not record it in her account of the exploits of her son. Mr. Sastri's conclusion is— "the attempts to ante-date Nahapāna by a century and Gautamīputra by half a century seem to be futile".

The present writer had occasion to discuss the date of Nahapāna in a paper on *The Later Sātavāhanas and the Śakas* in the *J. R. A. S.*, 1926 [1], and came to a conclusion similar to that of Mr. Bakhle. The arguments are too involved and intricate to be reproduced here. It must however be remarked that Mr. Srikanta Sastri's view that the Nasik inscriptions of Nahapāna (Ushavadatta?) refer to the coin Kushana is strange and unsupported. He gives no references. The word Kushana does indeed occur in the Nasik records, e. g. line 2 and end of line 3 in Nasik inscription No. 12 [2]; but in quite another sense, at least as understood by the leading authorities on the subject. Sir R. G. Bhandarkar wrote in 1874 on the word Kushana—"I have not been able to determine the sense of this word; but probably it means something connected with the Buddistic rite of *Kasina*" [3].

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[1] pp. 650-9. [2] *E. I.*, VIII, 82.

[3] Spence Hardy, *East. Monach.* Chap. XXI; *Transactions of the International Congress of Orientalists*, 1874, p. 332.

Attention may be also drawn to the very valuable remarks of M. Senart too long to be reproduced here [1]. He suggests that "Kuśana means a monthly stipend". In our opinion there is no objection to an early date for Nahapāna; and Gautamīputra "must be understood to have destroyed the lineal sucessor of Nahapāna". (R. G. Bhandarkar).

Now, let us examine the force of the arguments urged in favour of making either Hāla or Gautamīputra the founder of the Śaka era. The general acceptance of second century A.D. as the age of Kanishka, after the Taxila excavations, no doubt knocks out the bottom of the theory that ascribed the era to Kanishka. Beyond this rather obvious inference, all the arguments urged by Messrs. Sastri and Bakhle do not seem to carry us one step. Their arguments neutralise one another to a considerable extent. In the present state of evidence, we cannot define the date of Gautamīputra very closely; and neither "about 120 A.D." (S. Sastri) "nor the last quarter of the first century at the latest" (Bakhle) is so secure as it should be for it to affect materially the decision on the question of the Śaka era. And it is not so easy to base the argument on the dynastic list in the *Matsya Purāna*, because (a) the text of this Purāna varies in its many readings and conflicts with other Purānas, and (b) the starting point of Andhra dynasty is only conjectural. We may concede to Mr. Srikanta Sastri, without discussion, though only for the sake of argument, that the lexicographers identify Hāla with Śālivahana; even this will prove nothing unless reason is shown to ascribe the era to this dynasty of kings. And what do we find here? Mr. Bakhle's suggestion that Gautamīputra founded the era is repudiated by Mr. Srikanta, because his mother Gautami does not record it, and in this case the argument from silence seems to make a valid inference. Mr. Bakhle himself has drawn attention to a more serious difficulty that none of the Sātavāhana inscriptions is dated in the Śaka era; and Mr. Srikanta has not explained why, if Hāla started the era, we have no epigraphical confirmation of the fact in the known inscriptions of the dynasty.

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[1] *E. I.*, VIII, p. 83.

As a matter of fact, the name of the era prevailing at the present time — Śālivahana Śaka — seems responsible for these attemps to ascribe the era to the Sātavāhanas. On the other hand, it seems to have been forgotten that as Sir R. G. Bhandarkar said the era at present called Śālivahana Śaka was up to about the 13th century known by the name of "the era of Śaka king of kings" and "the era of the coronation of the Śaka king"[1]. AlBeruni invariably referred to the era as Śakakāla[2]; and some rather early inscriptions refer to the era "as dating from the anointment of the Śaka king to the sovereignty"[3]. Again Cunningham noted — it is not clear on what authority—that "the name of the Śaka king was Śālivahan"[4]. And Dr. R. Shama Sastri has said: "There is a traditional story that in B.C. 56 Vikrama established an era after his name and that in a battle fought near Karur in 78 A. D., Śālivahana defeated Vikrama and started his own era known as Śālivahana Śaka"[5]—an account of the origin of the Śaka era which reverses the story as given by AlBeruni. It would thus appear that the vague legends relating to this period leave us in doubt on the important question as to whether the era was started in commemoration of a Śaka victory or defeat. And the original name of the era raises a strong presumption that "such an era, bearing the name of the Śaka king that has lasted to the present day, cannot have come to be generally used, unless the Śaka kings had been very powerful, and their dominions extended over a very large portion of the country and lasted for a long time" (R.G. Bhandarkar).

Now Mr. Bakhle seems to be perfectly right in drawing attention to the circumstances relating to the fall of the Kshaharātas and the disintegration of the Śaka-Pahlava dominion before the advance of the Kushanas from the N. W. and the Sātavāhanas from the S. But he has not succeeded in show-

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1 Bhandarkar, *Early History of India*, p. 25.
2 Sachau, *AlBeruni's India*, II, p. 6.
3 Kielhorn, *List*, No. 3.
4 *Indian Eras*, p. 52.
5 *Q. J. M. S.*, XI, p. 80. See also *J. R. A. S*, 1913, p. 99.

ing that the Śaka era owes its origin to the Sātavāhanas and has himself drawn attention to the dificulties in the way of any one who seeks to establish the thesis. And the best view to take of the foundation of the Śaka era still seems to be that propounded by Mr. Sten Konow in editing the Taxila Silver Scroll inscription of the year 136 [1]. The era was most likely a foundation of Vima-Kadphises "who again subjected India to the sway of the Śakas" and appointed as his Viceroy either Castana as some hold, or his father Ysamotika whom Sten Konow identifies with Bhumaka. This view is not contradicted by any known evidence and gives a satisfactory explanation of the continuous use of the Śaka era by the Castana line of Western Ksatrapas.

It may be observed also that the theory of "the era of Azes" started by Sir John Marshall, who is followed by Mr. Bakhle, will have to be given up in view of the criticism to which that theory has been subjected by Mr. Sten Konow [2].

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[1] *E. I.*, XIV, p. 294.

[2] Ibid.

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